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ABSTRACT

This discussion asserts that growth in the field of communication is inevitable--because of technical advances in many areas, interdependence between organizations, news legislation, and the trend toward disclosure of information. As a result of this growth, careers for those who are competent in communication techniques are becoming more available. The fulfillment of the following criteria will help in the search for such jobs: experience in a broad range of communication skills, especially writing; knowledge of communication theory; ability to bridge gaps between communication theory and practical application; and understanding of the business environment. Advice for obtaining these skills and suggestions for investigating possibilities in business, industry, and government are given. (KS)

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Career Possibilities and Alternatives in Communication

Keynote Address

Metropolitan Washington Communication Association Conference

March 12, 1977

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Good Morning. Thank you, Ray, for the opportunity to share some of my experiences with other professionals. One of the problems in being a private consultant is the lack of opportunity to be with your peers. So I am looking forward to speaking with you and learning from you.

"Career Possibilities and Alternatives in Communication". An intriguing title. This conference itself demonstrates the dramatic changes which have occurred in our field in the 15 years since I graduated from college. In 1962 I didn't know there was such a thing as an "Alternative".

Communication, in all its many splendored definitions, is the growth area of the next decade--bringing with it tremendous career possibilities. This morning I want to analyze why I think it's a growth field; second, describe the kinds of companies, departments, and the skills they require; and third offer some suggestions on ways to begin a career.

There are, I believe, four primary reasons for this optimistic forecast in the growth of communication. First, is the technical advances in many fields. A recent New Yorker cartoon depicted two somber scientists sitting at their tables, surrounded by flasks, and percolating experiments. One has justed turned and

said, "Smith, I see by the company newspaper that we have been working on the same experiment for the last 20 years." The humor, of course, lies in the seed of truth. Computer hardware & software, engineering, ecological sciences, health care, manufacturing, banking; all are faced with what we know to be an information explosion.

Alvin Toffler pointed out in 1970 that the number of scientific articles and journals doubles about every 15 years.[1] How can any organization possible keep up with what it needs to know? This expolosion of technical information creates several communication problems:

--how to get the right information to the right people in a timely fashion

--how to prevent the overlap of resources depicted by the cartoon

--how to help members of the organization suffering from information overload.

These problems need the serious attention of professionals if we are not to drown in our own learning.

The second reason for the growth of communication lies in the concept of interdependence. With specialization of knowledge comes a demand to know how what others are doing may affect you. For example... at one time picking a new office site was a fairly simple decision. You went to the vacant lot nearest the

president's home. Now such a decision involves the community as you look at traffic patterns, homes and schools; the finance dept. as you consider the tax impact; somebody from EEO will want to know about complying with hiring guidelines; a group will certainly look at impact on the ecology; and if your're in New York someone from the Mayor's office will try and convince you not to leave the BIG APPLE.

How can all relevant information be brought together to make the best decisions? Interdependence and the consequent need for integration stimulates communication. The management experts are on our side. Harvard professors Paul Lawrence and Jay Lorsch in their work on integration write: "...early writers ignored...the interpersonal skills required to achieve integration."[2] Jay Galbraith, in a sophisticated analysis of communication and integration, states "...interpersonal competence is essential...Organization development activities are required to support the team decision process."[3] Specialization of knowledge, interdependence and integration stimulate communication; it's inherent in the system.

A third stimulus for the growth in communication comes from legislation. The Employee Retirement Income Act of 1974, ERISA, primarily deals with pensions. However, another part of the act deals with disclosure of information to employees. Pension plans and other

employee benefits must be communicated: "In a manner calculated...to be understood by the average plan participant or beneficiary."[4] The government has not yet defined the "average plan participant" but the implications are clear. Employee communication can no longer resemble a legal contract. Strike a blow to the lawyers influence on communication. The disclosure aspects of ERISA are having far reaching effects. "The act has prompted a number of companies to reevaluate and upgrade their full range of employee communications programs."[5] The right to know is no longer discretionary but a legal requirement. And according to a leading Communication consulting firm, the government is serious about enforcement. "Civil and criminal penalties for failure to disclose ERISA required information may be stiff, including fines and imprisonment."[6] Think of it, being in jail for failing to communicate!

Legislation, then, is a pressure for not just more, but better communication. The political environment suggests that we look for more regulations in the future.

A fourth factor in the growth of communication is the consumer movement and its emphasis on disclosure. The employee as consumer is a relatively new concept in

organizational communication. This recognition has lead to increased communication about corporate profits, productivity, the economy, and business plans. Organizations are realizing that their communication with external audiences is perhaps not as important as their single most valuable audience--employees. GM, Container Corp., DuPont, and Bank of America are among the companies who are responding to the new employee with extensive communication programs.[7]

This growth trend has been documented by a survey conducted by the Corporate Communications Report. Of 126 companies who responded to a questionnaire, over half had increased their employee communication significantly during the last two years, and 68% intend to do so in the coming two years. Not a single company had cut back in the last two years or intended to do so in the coming two years.[8]

So, there is every reason to believe that the scope of communication concerns in the future will be broad, that many companies are aware of the needs, and that skilled professionals will be required to meet these needs.

What kind of organizations have communication professionals?

In 1976, Miriam Goldfine, of Towers, Perrin, Forster & Crosby, and I conducted a small survey for the Industrial Communication Council. Although our original sample was ~~limited to~~ small, 30--20 women and 10 men--we got some interesting data.

SLIDE 2

Mr. Communicator's company has:

--a well known name

--50,000-100,000 employees

--$1-$5 billion in sales

--$1 billion or more in assets

SLIDE 3

Ms. Communicator's company was harder to define. While the majority worked for well-known corporations, a number of women worked for small companies, a number for the government and non-profit organizations, and two were in their own businesses.

On the whole, there is little doubt that the greatest opportunity for communicators lies with the large corporation, whether it be a manufacturer, a bank, an insurance company, or a utility.

Just who has responsibility for communication in most organizations? The Corporate Communications Survey indicated that for 60% of the companies in their sample the external communications department held primary responsibility for employee communications.[9] The titles vary: corporate communications, public affairs, marketing, public relations or corporate relations. This survey does not include all the people in training and development departments who are likely to be doing internal consulting and training.

In the ICC study we found that the responsibilities of the typical communication department were described in similar ways by both men and women. Here are the responsibilities in the order the respondents ranked them.

SLIDE 5

--employee communications

--management newsletter

--consulting

--upward communications

--audio visuals

--benefits

SLIDE 6

--public relations

--meetings

--annual reports

--speeches

--training

--multi media

Obviously, written communications--publications and management newsletters--are the foundation of corporate communication. Although employee publications are proliferating, not everybody is sold on this approach. One-to-one contact, is more effective--and more difficult to carry off. Some companies are creating training programs to improve their manager's communication skills. "The aim is to improve the relationship between each boss and employee; to make sure there is a smooth and open flow of information, both upward and downward, by face-to-face interaction."[10] In a survey I did last year for an investment firm I found that business was conducted primarily by oral communication. Print is used for documentation, follow-up, and ~~with~~ reaching large audiences. Clearly, the key to business transactions is in oral communication, face-to-face and over the phone. This results, of course, in a need for training: presentation skills, interviewing, negotiation, performance review discussions, and participating in meetings.

One sign of an organization's commitment to communication is how much money they are willing to spend. What resources are devoted to communication? The survey of 126 companies found that the median communication budget was $60,000 with a low figure of $1,000 and a high of $825,000.[11]

SLIDE 4

Ms. Goldfine and I found that the typical communication department has a budget of:

--$250,000 or more

--and fewer than 10 persons assigned in the unit.

There are departments with ~~up to~~ 50 to 100 employees, depending on the scope of their responsibilities.

Now that I have described the companies, the departments and the budgets, what specific skills are required of the communicators? We asked our participants to check off from a list their major skills and the degree to which they used them. This is what the women listed. The color shows rank order.

SLIDE 11

--editing

--writing

--managing communication function

--supervising production

--diagnosing communication problems

--interviewing

--graphics

The men listed:

--writing

--diagnosing communication problems

--managing communications function

--editing

--oral communications

Note the order of skills listed by the men after writing. Except for editing, these are broad, conceptual responsibilities. The women, on the other hand, seem more technically oriented. Perhaps women have turned inward, developing their technological expertise, while the men have moved out into the conceptual realm. Roger D'Aprix, Manager of Communication at Xerox said at the ICC meeting in October, "There is a need to look at the whys of our work, rather than hows and whats."[12]

Mr. D'Aprix's comment, more than anything else, points up the need for what you, as academically trained communicators, can offer. A better understanding of the whys, and in turn better choices in strategy, and more effective communication.

Before outlining what I think may be required to begin a career I want to share with you what some of the ICC members thought were critical incidents in their careers.

SLIDE 16

"The primary force has not been an incident but rather the ability to relate my work to the whole, not to turn in on myself but to provide a valuable service to management."

"The quick realization that the way up the ladder was to be more of a business man and less of a professional communicator."

I do not agree that one has to become less of a professional communicator; rather, in addition, you must learn the ways of business. I want to be clear that my point of reference is not just the profit making sector. All organizations--government, education, health care--as well as industry are involved in the growth of communication. There is a need to understand the context in which you work. You do not need to become an expert. But I have gained a healthy respect for claims adjustors, managers, clerks, actuaries, investment analysts and secretaries.

What of your communication skills? The data I have described indicates that writing is a critical skill, yet most communication departments do not demand such courses. Writing is one way to build a career. Conducting training is another. Whichever you choose, writing is still in demand. Satellites, TV, video are all part of many organization's communication. Hundreds have media centers. But we

have not reached the age of the global village--just yet. Writing should be part of your communication repetoire.

What other training will be useful? In addition to some understanding of business and basic writing skills you need a broad knowledge of communication processes.

A case study: You are on the staff of a large bank which is merging with a smaller bank. What needs to be communicated? to whom? and how?

--Should a letter go to each employee's home?

--A slide show on the differences in benefits?

--Meetings with managers to explain new functions?

--Perhaps a video tape of the president explaining the effects of the merger.

All or any of these? Given limited time and some restrictions on budget + staff, what would you do? Which audiences are most important and how will you reach them? How will you know what is of most concern to employees? This might make an interesting project for a seminar. As a professional communicator you will not have the luxury of time or the opportunity to do it more than once. What decisions will you make, and how will you make them? Ability to analyze audiences, package messages, trace information flow,

and handle all the media will be required to fulfill this assignment.

So I recommend some breadth in our field.

Beyond the specific skills, however, is Roger D'Aprix's haunting question. Why are you doing what your're doing? Chris Argyris, a noted behavioral scientist, has said that theory provides a cognitive map of what's out there in the organization. In order to minimize the risk to the client and to the consultant, we need to have some orderly way to go about our work.[13]

The dichotomy between theory and practice is, I believe, a false one. You need sound theory to guide your practice and research. And your practice can in turn guide you to better research and sounder theory.

The primary difficulty I have found with academic communicators is their inability to bridge the gap between theory and practice. Managers are not less bright than you, they have had different experiences. Your ability to translate what you know into workable practice is the key to a professional career outside of teaching.

In summary then, you need to fulfill 4 criteria:

1. experience in a broad range of communication skills including writing;

2. Knowledge of theory--whys and complexities of the communication process;
3. But this is not enough, you need also to be able to bridge the gap between theory and application and move between these two worlds; and
4. Some understanding of the business environment.

How does one go about getting trained to meet these four criteria? I'm not sure all of it can be found in courses. Different assignments would probably help. If learning persuasion, why not try to present your case to a community board when your chemical co. has polluted a nearby river? If studying small group behavior, why not look at the decision a group made to close a plant in the midwest? If interested in mass communication, develop a program to explain profit-sharing to the 400,000 at Sears or the latest computer to the multitudes at IBM. Or gather data on government activities in health care and develop a program to influence the legislation. These assignments, it seems to me, could be made without much change in the curriculum. They would, however, require that more professors become more aware of that big wide world that exists off campus.

A second possibility is to develop relationships with local communicators. Not to turn them into a job placement agency. Have them in class to critique

final projects, as a resource speaker, or to advise on curriculum. There are many roles such a person could play.

A third recommendation is: get thee over to the business school. Take the behavioral courses but don't overlook organization structure, finance, marketing, and management.

And best of all, get a job--any job. The career path has to begin with a small step. You probably won't find the job you want initially but having some experience is one of the best ways to get another job. Some entre level jobs are:

--researcher in government relations

--writer for the company newspaper

--interviewer in hiring and placement

--counselor in upward communication program

--trainer in a management development program

--producer for closed circuit TV news program.

You can use many of your skills, find out lots about the organization, and identify your own career goals.

A colleague recently said to me There are two important qualifies for a consultant. First, professional competence. Second, Relationship with the client. These hold true whether you are an

internal or external consultant. Professional competence you gain by training and lots of experience and feedback. Effective relationships with the client depend on you. Knowing yourself as a person, being comfortable with your own communication, building trust, and empathy are all qualities which come from within.

The possibilities for a career are there--you are in a growth field. Don't expect organizations to overwhelm the campus recruiters, they are used to looking to journalism for their communicators. You will have to assume responsibility for your own career. And if you decide to join the ranks of organizational communicators I hope you will find as I have the opportunity:

--to learn
--to make mistakes
--to take risks
--to have some influence
--to be fairly paid for your skills
--to be part of the forces of change
--and to have colleagues as valued friends.

I wish you well in whatever choice you make.

FOOTNOTES

[1] Alvin Toffler, Future Shock, Bantam Books, 1970, p. 31.

[2] Paul R. Lawrence and Jay W. Lorsch, Organization and Environment, Richard D. Irwin, 1969, p. 13.

[3] Jay Galbraith, Designing Complex Organizations, Addison-Wesley, 1973, p. 63.

[4] An Overview of ERISA Disclosure Requirements, Towers, Perrin, Forster & Crosby, 1976, p. 5. (for limited distribution)

[5] The Corporate Communications Report, January, 1976, p. 1.

[6] An Overview, p. 35.

[7] Report, p. 2.

[8] Report, p. 1.

[9] "Employee Communications Survey 1975", Corporate Communications Report, p. 2.

[10] Report, p. 2.

[11] "Survey, 1975". p. 7.

[12] Roger D'Aprix, speech at Industrial Communication Council Conference, Washington, D.C., October 23, 1976.

[13] Chris Argyris, Intervention Theory and Method: A Behavioral Science View, Addison-Wesley, 1970.